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Guide to Collecting Postcards

Del•ti•ol•o•gy n. the study of or
interest in collecting postcards;
the practice of amassing such a
collection.



Members IFPD

(International Federation of Postcard Dealers)

For more information or to join the

Montana Postcard Club, contact:

Jack & Susan Davis • 501 E. Peach

Bozeman, MT 59715 • 587-0937

A BRIEF HISTORY OF POSTCARDS

Condition, rarity, view or subject, and to a lesser degree age determine the value of any postcard. It's helpful to be able to date a postcard even if it has not been used, though this does not necessarily mean an earlier card will be worth more than a newer card. For example, postcards published during the 1930's and 1940's are becoming more popular and valuable as many middle aged people can identify with these images. This same gain in popularity can also been seen in postcards of the early Chrome Era (1945 - 1950's).

Postcards have been published in several eras from the 1860's until the present. Each publishing era has its own peculiarities which can be used to identify the age of a postcard. Listed below are seven of the more prominent eras of postcard publishing.

THE PIONEER CARD ERA (1893-1898)

The Pioneer Era began when picture postcards were sold at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in May of 1893. Their great success ensured that postcard collecting, then and now, would become a viable hobby.

Pioneer cards are relatively scarce. They can be identified by distinctive features such as undivided backs, a Grant or Jefferson head stamp and a postage rate of 2 cents. Other identifying characteristics include the fact that most are multiple view cards, the words "Souvenir of..." or "Greetings from..." appear on many, and they are most commonly titled "Souvenir Card" or "Mail Card."

THE PRIVATE MAILING CARD ERA (1898-1901)

On May 19, 1898, the U.S. government gave private printers permission to print and sell postcards. "Private Mailing Card" was printed on each card, making them easy to identify. Many of the early Pioneer views were reprinted as Private Mailing Cards with 1 cent postage.

THE UNDIVIDED BACK ERA (1901-1907)

On December 24, 1901, Congress permitted "Post Card" to be printed on the backs of privately printed cards. However, these cards had undivided backs and the user could write only the address on the back; the message had to be written on the picture side of the card. For this reason many of these cards have blank areas on the front for the writing.

THE DIVIDED BACK ERA (1907-1915)

On March 1, 1907, Congress followed

the lead of several European nations and permitted postcards to be divided down the middle of the back, making it possible for both the address and the message to be written there. This prevented the face of the card from being marked, enhancing their collectibility. Normally the images filled the entire card. This era saw an explosion of postcard publishing and is often referred to as **THE GOLDEN ERA OF POSTCARDS**. Some of the printing techniques used in this era were expensive and high quality, and are too technical and expensive to be used today.

THE WHITE BORDER ERA (1915-1930)

The golden age of postcard collecting ended as World War I began and imports from Germany ceased. Publishers in the U.S. began printing postcards to try to fill the void, but these cards were of very poor quality and many were reprints of earlier Divided Back Era cards. These are easily distinguished by the white border around the pictured area. Partly due to the poor printing quality, the White Border Era brought an end to the postcard craze.

THE LINEN ERA (1930-1945)

Improved printing technology led to improved card quality. Publishers began using a linen-like paper containing a high rag content and cheap inks. Postcards published during this era are gaining in

popularity and value since many middle aged people can identify with these views, many of which have changed in the intervening years.

PHOTOCHROME ERA (1939-present)

"Modern Chromes" were first introduced in 1939. Publishers began producing cards with vibrant chrome colors which appealed to collectors. The growth of this group has been such that many postcard dealers now specialize in chromes. Early chromes are often referred to as Pre-Zip Code Chromes. These cards are gaining in value and popularity since many "Baby Boomers" can identify with these cards.

REAL PHOTO POSTCARDS (1900-present)

Real Photo postcards were available as early as 1900, and were popular because views of a person's hometown or acquaintances could be turned into a postcard for personal use. They are highly collectible because of the likelihood that the views are unique as opposed to being produced on a massive scale. It's sometimes difficult to date a card unless it has been post-marked or dated by the photographer. Photo cards must be closely studied to ensure they're not reproductions.

GRADING OF POSTCARDS

The condition of a postcard, as with old coins, stamps or books, is an extremely important factor in pricing it. Damaged, worn or dirty cards are almost uncollectible except to fill a space until a better one is found. Never buy a damaged card if you expect to sell it later on.

To help determine a card's value, the following grading standard has been established, and is generally accepted by dealers and collectors alike.

Mint

A card as perfect as if it had just come off the printing press. No marks, bends, or creases. No writing or postmarks. Such a perfect card is seldom seen.

Near Mint

Like Mint but with light aging or discoloration from being in an album or other unprotected storage format.

Excellent

Like mint in appearance with no bends or creases. May be postmarked or with writing and postmark on the address side.

Very Good

Corners may be slightly rounded. An almost undetectable crease is acceptable. May have writing or a postmark on the

address side. Still quite collectible.

Good

Corners may be noticeably rounded with slight bends or creases. May be postmarked or have writing on address side.

Fair

Excess stains, creases, writing or other marks may affect the picture, but the card is still collectible if it's scarce. Condition, rarity, subject, print quality, demand, and to a lesser degree age also determine value.

Collectibility of postcards change as desirability changes. Currently desirable subjects include national parks, animals, art deco, signed artist, linen advertising, pretty women, and children. Real photo postcards are becoming collectible and are always gaining in value. Postcards appeal to almost anyone's collection and are not too expensive to purchase. Paper ephemera, including postcards and trade cards, are gaining in popularity and value as collectibles.

In terms of specific value, several factors determine a card's price. While condition is by far the most important determinant, other factors such as a card's availability, its current location, and subject matter can also help value the card.

AVAILABILITY

A regional example provides an excellent illustration. There are several views on

printed cards and some real photos of Old Faithful Inn in Yellowstone Park. However, a real photo of Fountain Hotel would be extremely rare and much more valuable. More and more collectors are turning to deltiology and cards which used to be common are getting harder to find and increasing in value.

CURRENT LOCATION

Views of specific locations are more likely to be sought by collectors who live in those areas and would be more valuable if they could be found there. A real photo scene of Bozeman might be worth \$25.00 in Bozeman but only \$5.00 in New York City or Los Angeles. Montana postcards in general are considered collectible since fewer cards were published than of areas with higher populations.

SUBJECT MATTER

Regardless of where they can be found, certain subjects are more sought after by certain collectors. Thousands of subjects are available to collect, and you can be sure that someone out there is looking for the card you're holding. No category is too narrow, whether it's political conventions, railroad depots, or mustachioed chefs wearing white carnations in their left lapels. And once again, if a dealer or collector knows a particular card is sought by a focused collector, that card is worth more than it would be to a general collector.